**The Family Reunion – An Ethnography**

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The family reunion represents a spectacular starting point for examining the family and its place as a powerful micro culture so influential toward the vast entity that is American culture. I think a family reunion is a fine place to see idiocincricies of American culture explained and magnified, as I believe it is human nature for us to display explicit cultural practices and behaviors around those that know us best and tend to incite genuine behavior. The subculture I have chosen to study for my ethnography is the American family, more specifically my extended family at a reunion barbeque. In my approach to this study I decided on a few themes to gather information for and will be included in my study. I observed the idea of reciprocity. I wanted to learn how people would appreciate or accept gesture, mainly food, as well as serving gestures of any kind. I focused on family status to see exhibits of status and authority and how they dictate how particular family members conduct themselves throughout the event. Finally, I focus on the hosting dynamic. I examine what it means to be a good host, how much energy and focus is put into it, and the significance of the role.

I chose to present my study from the first person point of view primarily because that is the way I experienced and approached the research. Much like Bruce Knauft in his study of the Gebusi people, I was not entirely a detached observer of the subjects of study, but immersed in the activities myself while maintaining the role of subtle observer. My ethnography is a scientific study presented through an eyewitness account. I do recognize, however, that my study has limitations that possibly result in the missing of events. In a study that involves the observation of approximately twenty five people, there is just no way to be present for every conversation and interaction, but I aimed to gather all the information I could for a well balanced study.

Selecting a place to conduct the study was not difficult considering it was a scheduled event taking place at my parents’ house. The entire duration of the event taking place in one small portion of the backyard made the study easier in the way it was contained in a specific, limiting setting lasting about three hours. Considering the event took place at my parents’ home adds an element to my role in the event as well as the study. I think this fact allowed for me to comfortably assume an observable role conducive to the detached/engaged dynamic necessary. My familiarity with my surroundings added to my ability to take advantageous positions in my observations.

Despite knowing many of the subjects involved personally for many years, I feel this does not deter my ability to conduct a legitimate study due to my tireless attempts to approach this study with no bias and the cultural relativity necessary. One of the many positive attributes I bring to a study of this nature is a natural curiosity for human behavior and social research, allowing me the ability to really analyze and observe the event in a way I enjoy and welcome. I feel this kind of analysis is something I’ve grown accustomed to doing in my everyday life and the information I pursued in this study is indicative of that.

In thinking further of my role in the study and the familiarity factor present amidst relationships with family members, I take an analytical approach and scope to my role within my family strata. I think whether we want to recognize it or not, we all have a perceived and yet defined role within our family structures which creates that ability for said family to be viewed differently by different members. In my research I experience through my interactions, through verbal and non verbal communication how my role is viewed and responded to as well as that of others. Of course, I do this by engaging many different people in conversation as well as sitting in several different locations throughout the event to gather data.

It can be said without a doubt that the focal point of this event was indeed the food. This family reunion was most certainly centered eating and food preparation. With a buffet style presentation, the hosts created an informal dining environment that left the guests to their own initiative as to when and what they wanted to eat. When the food is set on the table a line forms as if the natural instinct to sustain a sense of order takes over, while the question of whether there is an actual source of authority behind it comes to me. Further perpetuating the very casual theme surrounding the event, the elder men present line up first to get food in a way that almost emanates a sense of entitlement. I consider while watching this that this feeling comes from the fact that these men are directly related to the elder host of the event. The two hosts of the even take on a role of actively directing the meal portion of the event. My mom acts to persuade people to the food table in a casual but enthusiastic manner which starts the cycle of reciprocity in motion as it takes on many forms. Since my arrival at the event, the anticipation for the meal as the acting centerpiece to the social gathering was palpable, from assumption of its inevitability to the anticipation involved when a guest brings a dish they are anxiously awaiting an opinion on. For the hosts of this event, it is obvious that gratitude comes from the mere presence of the guests, while the desire for the guests to reciprocate that gratitude in the form of verbal compliments is very strong. What you witness in the host to guest dynamic is a twofold concept. Socializing between guests is inevitability in human nature; therefore the host is concerned in providing a comfortable environment, with proper food sustenance to accompany it. Gratification for the host is knowing they have been instrumental in creating an atmosphere of joy and entertainment, where an air of comfort is maintained and memories are made that positively reflect on them and what they create.

This air of comfort is constructed in a layout conducive to social interaction, likely being the driving force behind its inception. Comfortable chairs are set in semi circle formations on each side of a picnic table, where again the convenience factor is displayed by the abundance of snacks on it. Once food is served, guests take seats in a way that offers me the opportunity to examine family roles and how they influence family interaction. The elder men congregate and sit in close proximity to one another as if bringing about a unified sense of authority or hierarchal pecking order that starts with them amidst their circle. In this particular case, they all happen to be brother. As if an imaginary line is drawn through the picnic table, sons, daughters, nieces and nephews congregate on the opposite side and some at the table, offsetting the elders on the other side. The wives of these men also did not sit in close proximity to them as if to let them assume a bonding role with each other void of feminine influence.

The ensuing interactions are fascinating, as they are almost directly derivative of the proximity of family members. As various guests and family members venture in and out of conversation with the uncles passing by, I witness them become the brunt of jokes and playful ridicule indicative of a group in a position of strength and status, evidently coming from age and family position. All social activity ebbs and flows around them as all other family members of different ages and statuses stick mainly with their immediate families as it is innate human nature for us to do so to maintain comfort and familiarity in a setting that may present otherwise. I venture into conversation with the uncles in their half circle and quickly realize that conversation is mainly based upon storytelling with side notes of judgment passed on people either not seen in awhile or people not present with comments on physical appearance as well as career paths and life direction. As to fulfill and sustain this bond, groupthink seems to set in as very little dissention of any kind is seen or heard in any form. The nature of discussion affirms my assertion that it is exclusive to men of the status these men embody. I argue that the social structure of this event takes shape from an instinctual place as opposed to an intentional one.